

CRS Report for Congress

Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology

Updated January 24, 2007

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**Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress**

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 24 JAN 2007		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave, SE, Washington, DC 20540-7500				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT SAR	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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Summary

Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorist network have conducted a sophisticated public relations and media campaign over the last decade. Terrorism analysts believe that these messages have been designed to elicit psychological reactions and communicate complex political messages to a global audience as well as to specific populations in the Islamic world, the United States, Europe, and Asia. Some officials and analysts believe that Al Qaeda's messages contain signals that inform and instruct operatives to prepare for and carry out new attacks. Bin Laden has referred to his public statements as important primary sources for parties seeking to understand Al Qaeda's ideology and political demands. Global counterterrorism operations in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks appear to have limited Bin Laden's ability to provide command and control leadership to Al Qaeda operatives and affiliated groups. Other Al Qaeda leaders continue to release statements that sanction, encourage, and provide guidance for terrorist operations. Iraq has become a focal point for Al Qaeda's rhetoric, and statements continue to underscore Al Qaeda leaders' interest in Iraq and support for the ongoing insurgency.

Statements released by Osama Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al Zawahiri since late 2004 have rekindled public debate in Europe and the United States surrounding Al Qaeda's ideology, motives, and future plans for attacks. Statements released following the July 2005 Al Qaeda-linked suicide bombing attacks on the London transit system have characterized those attacks and Al Qaeda's ongoing terrorist campaign as a response to British and American military operations in Iraq. In January 2006, Bin Laden stated that Al Qaeda "does not object to a long-term truce" with the United States "on the basis of fair conditions" but alluded to nearly complete preparations to carry out attacks inside the United States.

The ideological content and highly political tone of these statements have led some terrorism analysts to speculate that the messages may signal an effort by Al Qaeda figures to reaffirm their leadership roles and the role of the Al Qaeda organization as the vanguard of an emerging, loosely organized international jihadist movement. Others have argued that the presently limited operational capabilities of Al Qaeda's central leaders have inspired them to focus on ideological outreach activities and efforts to influence public opinion in the United States and Europe. Many observers believe that the group's primary goal remains to inspire, plan, and support terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies around the world, with particular emphasis on targeting economic and energy infrastructure and fomenting unrest in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf states, and countries neighboring Israel.

This report reviews Al Qaeda's use of public statements from the mid-1990s to the present and analyzes the evolving ideological and political content of those statements. The report focuses primarily on statements made by Osama Bin Laden, but also considers: statements made by his deputy Ayman al Zawahiri, remarks by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi, and Al Qaeda military leader Sayf al Adl. The report will be updated periodically. For background on the Al Qaeda terrorist network, see CRS Report RL33038, *Al Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology

Introduction

Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorist network have conducted a sophisticated public relations and media campaign over the last ten years using a series of faxed statements, audio recordings, video appearances, and Internet postings.¹ Terrorism analysts believe that these messages have been designed to elicit psychological reactions and communicate complex political messages to a global audience as well as to specific populations in the Islamic world, the United States, Europe, and Asia. Bin Laden and his deputies have personally stated their belief in the importance of harnessing the power of international and regional media for Al Qaeda's benefit, and Al Qaeda's central leadership structure has featured a dedicated media and communications committee tasked with issuing reports and statements in support of the group's operations.² Some officials and analysts believe that Al Qaeda's messages contain signals that inform and instruct operatives to prepare for and carry out new attacks.

Bin Laden has referred to his public statements as important primary sources for parties seeking to understand Al Qaeda's ideology and political demands.³ Through his public statements over the last ten years, Bin Laden has portrayed himself both as the leader of a consistent ideological movement and a strategic commander willing to tailor his violent messages and acts to respond to specific political circumstances and to influence specific audiences and events. Surveys of jihadist literature suggest that such a leadership role may remain elusive for Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri, particularly among ideologues and religious scholars who otherwise support jihadist activities and goals. A study completed by the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in November 2006 concluded that "both men have had an enormous impact on the wider Jihadi Movement, but our data shows that they have had little to no impact on Jihadi thinkers."⁴

¹ Unless indicated, translated citations are derived from "Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements 1994-January 2004," Open Source Center (OSC) Report, GMP20040209000243, Feb. 9, 2004.

² Recent Al Qaeda messages have been produced by a dedicated studio, known as the Al Sahab.Institute for Media Productions.

³ For example, in Bin Laden's Oct. 2004 pre-U.S. presidential election message he referred to specific pre-9/11 interviews with a variety of media outlets as previous indications of Al Qaeda's ideology and demands.

⁴ William McCants and Jarret Brachman, "Militant Ideology Atlas: Executive Report," Nov. (continued...)

Global counterterrorism operations in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks appear to have limited Bin Laden's ability to provide command and control leadership to Al Qaeda operatives and affiliated groups. Bin Laden's last confirmed messages were released in June and July 2006, mourning the death of Abu Musab al Zarqawi and calling on Muslims to support the Islamists in Somalia. In a January 2006 message, he proposed a temporary truce with the United States in exchange for a series of U.S. concessions. It is unlikely, however, that Bin Laden could ensure a wholesale cessation of hostilities or that Al Qaeda supporters would abandon the strategic priorities reflected in their statements that have sanctioned, encouraged, and provided guidance for terrorist operations.

Al Qaeda: Statements 1994-2001

Founding Principles. Osama Bin Laden's experiences as a logistical coordinator and financier for the Afghan and Arab resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the 1980s are thought to have provided the backdrop for his belief that Muslims could take effective military action inspired by select Islamic principles. His exposure to the teachings of conservative Islamist scholars in Saudi Arabia and his work with Arab militants in Afghanistan provided the theological and ideological basis for his belief in the desirability of puritanical Salafist Islamic reform in Muslim societies and the necessity of armed resistance in the face of perceived aggression — a concept Al Qaeda has since associated with a communally-binding Islamic principle known as “defensive jihad.”⁵ After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Bin Laden expressed these views in opposition to the introduction of foreign military forces to Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden characterized the presence of U.S. and other non-Muslim troops in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War as cause for renewed commitment to defensive jihad and the promotion of violence against the Saudi government and the United States.

Declaration of Jihad. In the early 1990s, Bin Laden emphasized his desire to secure the withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops from Saudi Arabia at all costs. Bin Laden criticized the Saudi royal family publicly and alleged that their invitation of foreign troops to the Arabian peninsula constituted an affront to the sanctity of the birthplace of Islam and a betrayal of the global Islamic community.⁶ Finding his rhetoric and efforts rebuffed by Saudi leaders, Bin Laden was expelled from Saudi Arabia and his ire increasingly focused on the United States. Following a period of exile in Sudan and Afghanistan in which his radical views sharpened, Bin

⁴ (...continued)
2006

⁵ For more on Bin Laden and defensive jihad, see James Turner Johnson, “Jihad and Just War,” *First Things*, June/July 2002, pp. 12-14. Bin Laden has identified Salafist thinkers such as his former mentor Abdallah Azzam, Hamas founder Ahmed Yasin, World Trade Center bombing conspirator Omar Abdel Rahman, Saudi dissident clerics Salman al Awdah and Safar al Hawali, and 13th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyah as prominent ideological influences. For more on Salafism see CRS Report RS21695, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁶ Robert Fisk, “Interview With Saudi Dissident Bin Ladin” *Independent* (London), July 10, 1996.

Laden issued a declaration of jihad against the United States in 1996 that signaled his emergence as an internationally recognizable figure and offered a full account of his main critiques of an enemy he described as the “alliance of Jews, Christians, and their agents.”⁷ Adopting the sensitive historical and religious imagery of Islamic resistance to the European Crusades, Bin Laden condemned the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, criticized the international sanctions regime on Iraq, and voiced his opposition to U.S. support for Israel.⁸ The declaration also cited “massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani [as transliterated], Ogaden, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya, and Bosnia-Herzegovina” as examples of a growing war on Islam for which the United States should be punished (Bin Laden did not recognize the humanitarian aspects of U.S. efforts in Bosnia and Somalia explicitly).⁹

“Clash of Civilizations”. Following his declaration of jihad on the United States, Bin Laden released a series of statements that expanded the vision and scope of his self-declared conflict with the United States and specified his political prescriptions for the reformation of Islamic societies. Echoing U.S. academic Samuel Huntington’s theory on the impending clash of civilizations,¹⁰ Bin Laden repeated his characterization of a so-called “new crusade led by America against the Islamic nations,” and emphasized his belief that an emerging conflict between Islam and the West would be fought “between the Islamic world and the Americans and their allies.”¹¹ Bin Laden argued that the Islamic world should see itself as one seamless community, or *umma*, and that Muslims were obliged to unite and defend themselves. Turning his focus to the internal politics of the Islamic world, Bin Laden urged Muslims to find a leader to unite them and establish a “pious caliphate” that would be governed by Islamic law and follow Islamic principles of finance and social conduct.¹² Bin Laden repeatedly argued that Afghanistan had become a model Islamic state under his Taliban hosts and used religious rhetoric to solicit support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda.¹³

Although he possesses no traditional Islamic religious credentials or authority, Bin Laden issued a fatwa, or religious edict, in 1998 that claimed that the United

⁷ “Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” *Al Islah* (London), Sept. 2, 1996.

⁸ At the time, Bin Laden expressed no solidarity or sympathy for Saddam Hussein or his regime, explaining — “We, as Muslims, do not like the Iraqi regime but we think that the Iraqi people and their children are our brothers and we care about their future.” Fisk, “Interview With Saudi Dissident Bin Ladin” *Independent* (London), July 10, 1996. op. cit.

⁹ “Declaration of Jihad,” *Al Islah* (London), Sept. 2, 1996. op. cit.

¹⁰ See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1998.

¹¹ “Correspondent Meets With Opposition Leader Bin Ladin,” *Channel 4* (London) Feb. 20, 1997.

¹² “Pakistan Interviews Usama Bin Ladin,” (Islamabad, Pakistan), Mar. 18, 1997.

¹³ “Website Publishes Bin Ladin ‘Speech’” *Internet Supporters of Shariah*, June 22, 2000; and “Al Jazirah Program on Bin Laden” *Al Jazirah Television* (Doha, Qatar), June 10, 1999.

States had made “a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims”¹⁴ through its policies in the Islamic world. The fatwa made use of the principle of defensive jihad to argue that U.S. aggression made armed resistance and the targeting of American civilians and military personnel incumbent upon all Muslims. The statement also announced the formation of “The World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders,” which consisted of a tacit alliance between Bin Laden, his supporters, and a number of regional Islamic militant groups. Following Al Qaeda’s bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen (2000), Bin Laden refused to take direct responsibility for the attacks, but claimed that he approved of the strikes and shared the motivations of the individuals who had carried them out. Bin Laden argued that the bombings should be seen by Americans and the world as retribution for U.S. policy and compared them to alleged “massacres” of Palestinians in historic cases familiar to many Muslims and Arabs.¹⁵

Al Qaeda Post-9/11

Osama Bin Laden’s longstanding threats to strike the United States came to fruition on September 11, 2001, and Bin Laden and others subsequently issued several statements confirming Al Qaeda’s responsibility for the attacks on New York and Washington. Following an established pattern, Bin Laden acknowledged his support for the hijackers and repeated his claim that strikes on American targets should be viewed by Muslims and Americans as a defensively motivated response to perceived American aggression in the Islamic world. Statements attributed to Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri since 2001 have promised further attacks and sought to justify Al Qaeda’s targeting of American and British civilians by arguing that Western societies are morally corrupt, recent democratic reform and human rights initiatives are insincere or bankrupt, and American and British civilians should be held accountable for the policies of their democratically elected governments in the Middle East that Al Qaeda finds objectionable or unjust.¹⁶

“The Goals of the New York Strike”

Several Al Qaeda statements have addressed the motives for the 1998 Embassy bombings and other terrorist operations, but relatively few statements have been

¹⁴ “Text of Fatwa Urging Jihad Against Americans,” *Al Quds Al Arabi* (London), Feb. 23, 1998. The fatwa argued that defensive jihad was necessary “in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip [the U.S. and Israel].”

¹⁵ Bin Laden specifically cited “Sabra, Shatila, Deir Yasin, Qana, Hebron and elsewhere.” “Al Jazirah Program on Bin Laden” *Al Jazirah Television* (Doha, Qatar), June 10, 1999.

¹⁶ “It is a fundamental principle of any democracy that the people choose their leaders, and as such, approve and are party to the actions of their elected leaders... By electing these leaders, the American people have given their consent to the incarceration of the Palestinian people, the demolition of Palestinian homes and the slaughter of the children of Iraq. This is why the American people are not innocent. The American people are active members in all these crimes.” “Statement From Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin, May God Protect Him, and Al Qaeda Organization,” *Al Qal’ah* (Internet), Oct. 14, 2002.

made regarding Al Qaeda's strategic goals in planning and executing the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. A text attributed to Al Qaeda military commander Sayf al Adl released in May 2005 identifies three primary objectives for the September 11 attacks.¹⁷ According to Al Adl, Al Qaeda's "main objective" in perpetrating the September 11 attacks was to carry out a damaging strike against the United States in retaliation for its perceived aggression in the Islamic world. Al Adl indicates that in the opinion of Al Qaeda's leadership, this primary objective was "partially achieved," although "other strikes" would have had a greater impact if they had been successful. However, Al Adl does not identify specific planned attacks that may have been disrupted since September 2001.

Al Qaeda's second objective, as identified by Al Adl, was to signal and support the "emergence of a new virtuous leadership" dedicated to opposing "the Zionist-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant coalition" that Al Qaeda blames for a litany of social and political ills in the Islamic world. Analysts have associated this stated objective with Al Qaeda leaders' views of themselves as the vanguard of a broader global Islamic movement and their desire to inspire political upheaval and change across the Islamic world. The third and "ultimate objective," according to Al Adl, "was to prompt [the United States] to come out of its hole." Al Adl claims that Al Qaeda wanted to provoke the United States into attacking areas of the Islamic world associated with the organization and its affiliates. In doing so, Al Adl claims, Al Qaeda hoped to make it easier to attack elements of U.S. power and to build its "credibility in front of [the Islamic] nation and the beleaguered people of the world."

Reflecting on the subsequent U.S. response to the attacks, Bin Laden and others have described the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as new "crusades" and highlighted both the considerable economic impact of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent costs of the U.S. military response as indications of Al Qaeda's effectiveness. Al Adl and others have conceded that the attacks on New York and Washington were not totally successful, while arguing that the September 11 attack "was enough to prompt the Americans to carry out the anticipated response" — namely direct military action within the Islamic world.¹⁸ Al Qaeda appears to have been less successful in using the purportedly hoped for U.S. military response to "help the [Islamic] nation to wake from its slumber," as it claims to have planned. Both Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al Zawahiri have criticized the population and governments of the Islamic world for failing to answer their calls to arms and for cooperating with the United States and its allies. These criticisms have been coupled with renewed calls for armed "resistance" against the United States and its allies from Al Zawahiri, Al Adl, the late Al Zarqawi, and others.

¹⁷ Although portions of the text may reflect revised perspectives and the benefit of hindsight, its key statements of intent correspond to elements of prior statements by Osama Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda figures. "Detained Al-Qa'ida Leader Sayf al-Adl Chronicles Al-Zarqawi's Rise in Organization," OSC Report - GMP2005060637100, May 21, 2005.

¹⁸ In his May 2005 statement, Sayf Al Adl argues, "What we had wished for actually happened. It was crowned by the announcement of Bush Jr. of his crusade against Islam and Muslims everywhere." OSC Report - GMP2005060637100, May 21, 2005.

Al Qaeda Statements in 2004-2006

Outreach and 'Truce' Proposals. In 2004 and 2006, Bin Laden personally addressed the governments and citizens of Europe and the United States directly in an effort to discourage further support for their respective foreign policies in the Islamic world. In April 2004, Bin Laden proposed a "truce" with Europeans if they agreed to abandon their support for the United States and their military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The offer was resoundingly rejected by European leaders and their citizens. In October 2004, on the eve of the U.S. presidential election, Bin Laden made a similar statement in which he urged Americans to reevaluate their policies toward the Islamic world and threatened to bleed and bankrupt the United States. In late November 2004, Al Zawahiri stated Al Qaeda's intention to continue its jihad against the United States indefinitely until its leaders deem "U.S. policy toward Muslims" to be non-aggressive. These sentiments were echoed in tapes issued by Al Zawahiri in 2005, in which he cited Bin Laden's truce offer and characterized Al Qaeda's message to Americans and their allies as "crystal clear."¹⁹ In January 2006 Bin Laden stated that Al Qaeda "does not object to a long-term truce" with the United States "on the basis of fair conditions," but it is unlikely that he could guarantee a total cessation of hostilities or that other Al Qaeda figures would abandon strategic priorities that include long-term confrontation with the United States and its allies.²⁰

Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders have cast further doubt on the validity of their truce proposals by simultaneously calling for further attacks on U.S. and European targets and praising terrorist attacks that have targeted and killed civilians. In December 2004, Osama Bin Laden released audio tapes calling for continued attacks on U.S. forces and interests and revealing his perspectives on events in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian territories. The first tape, released on December 16, 2004, received media attention for its praise of an Al Qaeda-affiliated group's attack on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in early December 2004.²¹ The remainder of the tape was devoted to delivering a litany of religiously based criticisms of the Saudi royal family for its support for the United States and its insufficient commitment to the implementation of Islamic law and moral principles. Bin Laden appealed directly to "the silent *ulema*" (religious scholars) and business and community leaders in Saudi Arabia to withdraw their support for the ruling Al

¹⁹ "The lion of Islam mujahid Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin... offered you a truce until you leave the land of Islam... Has Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin not informed you that you will not dream of security until we live it in reality in Palestine and before all infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad, may peace be upon him? You however shed rivers of blood in our land so we exploded volcanoes of anger in your land... Our message to you is crystal clear: Your salvation will only come in your withdrawal from our land, in stopping the robbing of our oil and resources, and in stopping your support for the corrupt and corrupting leaders." Ayman al Zawahiri, "Message on Desecration of Holy Koran and the Infidel Democracy," Aug. 4, 2005, OSC Report - GMP20050927550001.

²⁰ "Bin Ladin Threatens New Operations, Offers 'Long-Term Truce,'" OSC Report - GMP20060119544004, January 19, 2006.

²¹ "Bin Ladin Contests Legality of Saudi Rulers, Praises Attack on US Consulate," OSC Report - GMP20041216000222, Dec. 16, 2004.

Saud family. In the second tape, released on December 27, 2004, Bin Laden underscored Al Qaeda's interest in Iraq and support for the ongoing insurgency. Bin Laden's January 2006 message implied that Al Qaeda operatives had infiltrated the United States and were preparing to strike.

Iraq and Al Qaeda's Ideology

Strategic Perspectives. In December 2004, Bin Laden identified the conflict in Iraq as "a golden and unique opportunity" for jihadists to engage and defeat the United States, and he characterized the insurgency in Iraq as the central battle in a "Third World War, which the Crusader-Zionist coalition began against the Islamic nation."²² Describing Baghdad as "the capital of the caliphate," Bin Laden asserted that "jihad in Palestine and Iraq today is a duty for the people of the two countries" and other Muslims. On a strategic level, Bin Laden has employed well-known Quranic injunctions against failing to contribute to "the cause of God" to appeal to Muslims to support Al Qaeda and its jihadist affiliates in Iraq politically, financially, and militarily.²³ He has also personally welcomed and endorsed the late Jordanian-born terrorist leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi as an Al Qaeda affiliate and the leader of Al Qaeda operations in Iraq.²⁴ In January 2006, Bin Laden stated that "Iraq has become a point of attraction and recruitment of qualified resources."

Subsequent statements attributed to Al Zarqawi and Ayman al Zawahiri have underscored the importance of the conflict in Iraq to the jihadist cause from Al Qaeda's perspective. In May 2005, Al Zarqawi reaffirmed his allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and reflected on the success of insurgent operations in Iraq as a symbol of Al Qaeda's success.²⁵ Al Zawahiri reiterated the interest of Al Qaeda's leadership in the Iraqi insurgency and the country's political developments in many of his messages during 2005. Both men vehemently denounced the successful constitutional and electoral processes that have laid the groundwork for the formation

²² Bin Laden described the stakes of the confrontation between coalition and jihadist forces in Iraq in the following terms: "The whole world is watching this war and the two adversaries; the Islamic nation, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other. It is either victory and glory or misery and humiliation. The nation today has a very rare opportunity to come out of the subservience and enslavement to the West and to smash the chains with which the Crusaders have fettered it." OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004.

²³ Bin Laden: "The one who stays behind and fails to join the Mujahidin when Jihad becomes an individual duty commits a cardinal sin... The most pressing duty after faith is repelling the aggressor enemy. This means that the nation should devote its resources, sons, and money to fight the infidels and drive them out of its lands." OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004. See also the Quran - Al Tawbah, 9:42-72.

²⁴ "Website Posts Full Version of New Audiotape Attributed to Bin Ladin," OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004. Bin Laden's endorsement read, "It should be known that Mujahid brother Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi is the Amir of the Tanzim al-Qa'idah fi Bilad al-Rafidayn [Al-Qa'ida Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers]. The brothers in the group there should heed his orders and obey him in all that which is good."

²⁵ "Al-Zarqawi Addresses Letter to Bin Ladin on Al-Qa'im Battle, 'Plan,'" OSC Report - GMP20050530549008, May 30, 2005.

of the new Iraqi government: Al Zawahiri has repeatedly argued that the democratic reforms initiated by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan are incomplete and insincere, while Al Zarqawi adopted more sectarian rhetoric in seeking to dissuade Iraq's Sunni community from participating in the country's democratic processes and to condemn Iraq's Shiite political organizations and communities on religious grounds.

Tactical Differences? On a tactical level, statements from leading Al Qaeda figures have demonstrated a degree of differentiation in their preferred methods for opposing coalition forces in Iraq and the new Iraqi government. Bin Laden has identified "martyrdom operations," or suicide attacks, as "the most important operations" for disrupting the activities of the United States and its allies.²⁶ Politically, he has encouraged Islamist insurgents in Iraq to work with "Socialist" groups (Baathists) and compared cooperation between Islamists and Baathists to Arab and Persian collaboration against the Byzantine empire in the 7th and 8th centuries.²⁷ Bin Laden has also encouraged Muslim Iraqis and non-Iraqis of all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to cooperate in opposing the Iraqi Government and coalition forces in Iraq. He has applied similar disregard for ethnic, linguistic, and ideological differences in issuing condemnations of so-called collaborators; identifying Arabs cooperating with Iraqi and coalition authorities as equally guilty parties.²⁸

While Al Zawahiri and Al Zarqawi were similarly indiscriminate in their calls for anti-U.S. cooperation, differences appeared to have emerged in their perspectives on the targeting of Muslims who collaborate with coalition troops or initiatives and the desirability of pursuing an agenda of violent opposition to Iraq's Shiite-led government on sectarian grounds. These differences became public in October 2005 after the publication of an intercepted letter reportedly written by Al Zawahiri to Al Zarqawi in which Al Zawahiri offered advice to Al Zarqawi on his campaign in Iraq. Specifically, Al Zawahiri questioned the wisdom of pursuing a campaign against Shiite Iraqis on a sectarian basis when sectarian violence may reduce overall public support among the region's Sunni Muslim population for Al Qaeda's objectives.²⁹

²⁶ Bin Laden urged followers to "...become diligent in carrying out martyrdom operations... These are the most important operations." OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004.

²⁷ Bin Laden sanctioned cooperation with Baathists "despite our belief in the infidelity of socialists." "Usama Bin Ladin's Message to Iraq," *Al Jazirah Television*, Feb. 11, 2003.

²⁸ "The Iraqi who is waging Jihad against the infidel Americans or Allawi's renegade government is our brother and companion, even if he was of Persian, Kurdish, or Tukomen origin. The Iraqi who joins this renegade government to fight against the Mujahidin, who resists occupation, is considered a renegade and one of the infidels, even if he were an Arab from Rabi'ah or Mudar tribes." OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004.

²⁹ Judging by statements made in the letter, Al Zawahiri largely shared Al Zarqawi's disdain for Shiite Muslims generally and Iraq's Shiite political groups in particular. He questions the timing of Al Zarqawi's anti-Shiite operations because in his opinion, a majority of the Sunni community Al Qaeda is trying to mobilize on a region-wide basis do not feel as strongly or as negatively about Shi'ism or the Shiite community in Iraq. The letter is (continued...)

Iraq and Al Qaeda's Regional Ambitions. Abu Musab al Zarqawi and Al Qaeda military leader Sayf al Adl have referred to the current situation in Iraq as an opportunity for the global jihadist movement to take advantage of insecurity in the heart of the Arab world and to spread into neighboring areas. Al Adl has speculated that the ongoing violence in Iraq may spread into Syria and Lebanon, which could give “the Islamic action a vast area of action and maneuvering” and help it to attract “tremendous human and financial resources.” The expansion of violence in the Middle East could also bring the jihadist movement close to “the border of occupied Palestine” and into direct confrontation with Israel, according to Al Adl, which, in his opinion, would further legitimize the jihadist cause and its supporters. Al Zarqawi's group claimed responsibility for two 2005 terrorist attacks in Jordan as well as a rocket attack launched against Israel from Lebanon in December 2005. Since December 2006, Al Zawahiri has congratulated Abu Umar al Baghdadi, the so-called Emir of the Al Qaeda affiliated Islamic Emirate of Iraq in Iraq's western Al Anbar province, and called on Muslims to reject “hateful patriotism” that divides them into national groups and channels their loyalties away from transnational Islamic unity.

Political Goals and Perspectives on Reform

The Three Foundations. Al Qaeda's strategic analysis and the operations of its affiliates continue to be supported by centrally planned ideological outreach activities. In a January 30, 2005 audiotape, for example, Ayman al Zawahiri identified “three foundations” of Al Qaeda's political ideology and applied them to events in Iraq and elsewhere.³⁰ The three principles were repeated in a June 2005 video message from Al Zawahiri. Al Zawahiri, who is regarded as Al Qaeda's chief ideologue, described Al Qaeda's core principles in sharp contrast to secular and religious reform ideologies voiced by other Muslims as well as recent U.S. support for democracy. This may signal an attempt by Al Qaeda's leadership to renew and clearly define its goals as a basis for attracting new recruits and inspiring new affiliates. The “three foundations,” as outlined by Al Zawahiri are as follows:

- “The Quran-Based Authority to Govern.” According to Al Zawahiri, Al Qaeda supports the creation of an Islamic state governed solely by sharia law. Secular government or “man-made” law is considered unacceptable and deemed contrary to Islamic faith.
- “The Liberation of the Homelands.” Al Zawahiri argued that reforms and free elections will not be possible for Muslims without first establishing “the freedom of the Muslim lands and their liberation from every aggressor.” He also emphasized the importance of establishing control over the Middle East's energy resources and described the Muslim world as “impotent and exposed to the Israeli nuclear arsenal.”

²⁹ (...continued)

available in Arabic and English at [<http://www.dni.gov/>].

³⁰ “Al-Zawahiri Denounces US, Argues for Reign of Islamic Law and Caliphate, Jihad Against Crusaders and Jews,” OSC Report - GMP20050131000021, Jan. 31, 2005.

- “The Liberation of the Human Being.” Al Zawahiri articulated a vision of a contractual social relationship between Muslims and their rulers that would permit people to choose and criticize their leaders but also demand that Muslims resist and overthrow rulers who violate Islamic laws and principles. He criticized hereditary government and identified a need “to specify the power of the sharia based judiciary, and insure that no one can dispose of the people’s rights, except in accordance with this judiciary.”

Al Qaeda on Democracy and Reform. Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi have applied these and other similar principles to issues of democracy, reform, and conflict in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Egypt, and the Palestinian territories. In both of his December 2004 statements, for example, Bin Laden clearly stated his view that democracies, constitutional governments, and insufficiently Islamic monarchies are equally unacceptable forms of governance for Islamic societies because they empower human rulers and man-made legal systems rather than “the law of God.”³¹ Al Zarqawi expanded on these sentiments in a January 2005 statement that characterized democracy as a rival “religion” to Islam and criticized adherence to democratic principles such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion as un-Islamic and tantamount to apostasy punishable by death.³² Al Zarqawi condemned the Iraqi Islamic Party and other Iraqi Sunni groups for participating in the 2005 constitutional referenda and parliamentary elections. He also frequently characterized the Iraqi government as illegitimate and collaborationist, echoing to his January 2005 post-election statement that his followers in Iraq would “not accept the rule of anyone but that of God and His Prophet [Mohammed].”³³

Bin Laden’s December 2004 statements urged Muslims to oppose the creation of democratic governments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian territories; to resist non-Islamic reform movements in other Islamic societies; and to overturn existing regimes deemed insufficiently-Islamic by Al Qaeda such as the Saudi monarchy.³⁴ Al Zawahiri repeated Bin Laden’s assertions throughout 2005 and

³¹ For example, Bin Laden has linked his opposition to insufficiently Islamic governance in Saudi Arabia to his view that under the Saudi monarchy, “absolute obedience and supremacy are given to the king and his laws, and not to God’s religion.” OSC Report - GMP20041216000222, Dec. 16, 2004.

³² According to Bin Laden, Muslims have a right to participate in the selection of their rulers only under certain “conditions,” namely the absence of occupying foreign powers and the presence of candidates willing to rule solely according to Islamic law. OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004.

³³ “Al Zarqawi on US Casualties in Iraq, Elections, Israel,” OSC Report - GMP20060109519001, Jan. 9, 2006; and “Al-Zarqawi’s Group Issues Post-Election Statement, Claims Attacks Against US Embassy, Mosul Targets,” OSC Report - FEA20050201001026, Feb. 1, 2005.

³⁴ Bin Laden’s critiques of Iraq’s Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) and the Palestinian Authority reflect these sentiments: “The constitution (TAL), which was imposed by U.S. occupier Bremer, is a man-made and pagan constitution, which insisted that Islam should
(continued...)

added specific criticism of U.S. detention centers at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and Abu Ghraib, Iraq and characterized them as examples of U.S. reform plans for the Islamic world. Al Zawahiri also dismissed Afghan, Egyptian, and Iraqi elections as incomplete and argued that the United States and its allies would not have supported the elections if the results may have yielded Islamist governments that could oppose U.S. policies in the region. Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri have based their calls for revolutionary change in Islamic societies on a stated belief in a model of governance where Muslim citizens would empowered to choose and depose their leaders according to Islamic principles and traditions of consultation, or *shura*.³⁵ Bin Laden specifically argued that, “all Muslims should embark on reforms” but similarly cautioned that “reforms should be achieved in accordance with the religious laws.” In December 2006, Al Zawahiri pointedly criticized the Palestinian group Hamas for failing to demand “that Palestine have an Islamic constitution before entering any elections.”³⁶

Strategic Framework

Al Qaeda military commander Sayf al Adl concluded his May 2005 text with advice for Al Zarqawi and other affiliates that includes a detailed strategic framework for the jihadist movement.³⁷ While Al Adl’s statement is one among many jihadist strategic documents that have surfaced in recent years, it is noteworthy because it was issued by an individual thought to be a key member of Al Qaeda’s scattered leadership and offered a uniquely detailed outline. Elements of similar strategic thinking appeared in statements issued by Al Zawahiri and Al Zarqawi in late 2005. A summary follows:

- Jihadist action must have a clear “thought or idea that outlines its means and objectives.” Al Adl recommended that Al Zarqawi and others declare that their strategic “objective is to reintroduce the Islamic way of life by means of establishing the state of Islam that will solve the entire problems of the nation.” This objective should be supported ideologically by “a circle of judicious men and scholars” and propagated by “a special *da’wah* (Islamic outreach) authority.” The goal is to better enable the jihadist movement to employ “the [Islamic] nation’s potentials, including human and financial resources” by attracting more supporters.

³⁴ (...continued)

not be the sole source of legislation... Palestine is under occupation and its constitution is man-made and pagan, and Islam has nothing to do with it.” OSC Report - FEA20041227000762, Dec. 27, 2004.

³⁵ “If the ruler renounces the law of God, the governed, on God’s orders, must cease to obey him... Rights cannot be restored from a regime when the ruler becomes renegade or refuses to follow religion except by force.” OSC Report - GMP20041216000222, Dec. 16, 2004.

³⁶ OSC Report - GMP20061221635002, Dec. 21, 2006.

³⁷ “Detained Al-Qa’ida Leader Sayf al-Adl Chronicles Al-Zarqawi’s Rise in Organization,” OSC Report - GMP2005060637100, May 21, 2005.

- The strategic objectives of the jihadist movement should be rooted in and motivated by what Al Adl refers to as “the clear banner of Islam — the banner of ‘there is no deity but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.’” This fundamental statement of Islamic faith is meant to signify the ultimate priority of the principle of *tawhid*, or the unity and authority of God and religion, in Al Qaeda’s ideological framework.
- Detailed strategic and operational plans must be developed with short-term and long-term components. Al Adl links the failures of other “contemporary Islamic movements” to the fact that their “actions were mostly random.” According to Al Adl, “mujahidin should have short-term plans aimed at achieving interim goals and long-term plans aimed at accomplishing the greater objective, which is the establishment of a state.” Throughout his statement, Al Adl alludes to the existence of a broad plan developed by Al Qaeda’s leaders, but he declines to describe it in detail.

Targeting Israel. Variations in the intensity and prominence of Al Qaeda leaders’ anti-Israeli rhetoric have fueled suggestions that Al Qaeda’s commitment to the Palestinian cause waxes and wanes depending on the network’s need for support — becoming more pronounced during periods when Al Qaeda’s actions have alienated supporters or recently as part of a more outright ideological appeal. Bin Laden has addressed these charges personally and argued that support for the Palestinians and all Muslims is and will remain essential to Al Qaeda’s cause, which is the mobilization of the entire Muslim world in resistance to perceived U.S. aggression.³⁸ Other Al Qaeda figures have alluded to the desirability of attacks on and eventual conflict with Israel. In January 2006, Al Zarqawi claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on northern Israel, which he claimed was personally ordered by Osama Bin Laden. He described the attack as “the beginning of a blessed action to strike the Zionist enemy at the heart of its existence.”³⁹

The Importance of Oil. Al Qaeda leaders’ statements reveal sophisticated consideration of the economic and military vulnerabilities of the United States and its allies, particularly with regard to the role of Middle Eastern oil as “the basis of industry” in the global economy.⁴⁰ Statements by Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri urging attacks on oil infrastructure and military supply lines could indicate a shift in Al Qaeda’s strategic and tactical planning in favor of a more protracted attritional conflict characterized by disruptive attacks on economic and critical energy production infrastructure. For example, in an interview reportedly conducted on or around the fourth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Al Zawahiri

³⁸ “Interview Held with Usama Bin Ladin,” *Jihad Online News*, Jan. 21, 2003.

³⁹ “Al Zarqawi on US Casualties in Iraq, Elections, Israel,” OSC Report - GMP200601 09519001, Jan. 9, 2006.

⁴⁰ “One of the most important reasons that made our enemies control our land is the pilfering of our oil... Be active and prevent them from reaching the oil, and mount your operations accordingly, particularly in Iraq and the Gulf for this is their fate.” OSC Report - GMP20041216000222, Dec. 16, 2004.

urged “mujahidin to concentrate their campaigns on the Muslims’ stolen oil” and to “not allow the thieves ruling [Muslim] countries to control this oil.”⁴¹ Bin Laden has called for Muslim societies to become more self-sufficient economically and has urged Arab governments to preserve oil as “a great and important economic power for the coming Islamic state.” Bin Laden also has described economic boycotts as “extremely effective”⁴² weapons.

Implications and Conclusion

Statements from Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, the late Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, and Sayf al Adl display the uncompromising commitment of Al Qaeda’s leaders and affiliates to a consistent ideological agenda focused on two sequential goals: the expulsion of foreign forces and influences from Islamic societies and, ultimately, the creation of an Islamic state ruled by sharia law. The political prescriptions outlined in the statements are rooted in the Islamic principle known as *tawhid*, or the principle of the absolute unity of God, and an identification of Islam as an all-encompassing religious, political, and social system.⁴³ According to this perspective, Islamic faith, adherence to Islamic law, and implementation of conservative Islamic social and political principles are synonymous. Throughout their statements, Bin Laden, Al Zawahiri, and Al Zarqawi characterize as “infidels” those who do not share these beliefs, those who oppose the creation of an Islamic state on the terms they describe, and those supporting existing governments and coalition activities in the Islamic world.

Al Qaeda’s Audiences

Al Qaeda’s diverse statements contain calculated variations in tone and content that address or appeal to various target audiences. In his early statements, for example, Osama Bin Laden adopted a pseudo-nationalist tone in directly addressing the population of Saudi Arabia and outlining ways that specific groups in Saudi society could support Al Qaeda. In his 2004 and 2006 statements addressed to the U.S. and European public, Bin Laden blended threats of violence with attempts to portray himself as a statesmanlike figure more palatable to Western audiences and appealing to moderate Muslims. Bin Laden’s earlier statements also addressed the American public in several instances that he since has characterized as attempts to explain his motives and outline steps the United States should have taken in order to avoid Al Qaeda attacks.

Over time, the cornerstone of Al Qaeda leaders’ religious and political rhetoric has remained consistent: Muslims should view themselves as a single nation and

⁴¹ “Al Qa’ida’s Al Zawahiri Predicts Failure of US ‘Crusade’ Against Muslim States,” OSC Report - GMP20051207507001, Dec. 7, 2005.

⁴² “Declaration of Jihad” *Al Islah* (London), Sept. 2, 1996. op. cit.

⁴³ According to Bin Laden, “Islam is one unit that can not be divided... a way of life revealed by God for men to abide by all of its aspects in all their affairs.” OSC Report - FEA2004122700076, Dec. 27, 2004.

unite to resist anti-Islamic aggression on the basis of obligatory defensive jihad. Non-Islamic government is unacceptable, and Muslims should join Al Qaeda and other sympathetic groups and movements in opposing those seeking to establish secular democratic governments or maintain existing governments deemed to be insufficiently Islamic. Bin Laden has often coupled his “Islamic-unity” rhetoric with litanies of anti-Semitic statements, condemnations of Israel, and allegations of U.S. complicity in the suffering of Muslims worldwide. In many pre-9/11 statements, Bin Laden broadened his rhetorical outreach to appeal to non-Arab Muslims, especially those concerned with or engaged in conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, and the Philippines. Following September 11, 2001, Bin Laden has appealed directly to national groups on the front lines of robust counter-terrorism operations, particularly the populations of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories.

Pragmatic Messianism

Although Bin Laden’s ideological rhetoric has remained relatively consistent, he and other Al Qaeda leaders have placed varying levels of emphasis on specific strategic objectives and tactics in their statements over the years. In statements addressed to U.S. and European audiences, Bin Laden and others have outlined specific political demands that support an image of Al Qaeda as a pliable, pragmatic political actor. Nevertheless, Al Qaeda’s operational record seems to indicate that its leaders’ commitment to specific national causes and limited political objectives are rhetorical tools designed to elicit support for their broader ideological agenda of confrontation with the West and puritanical reform in the Islamic world. For example, Bin Laden’s rhetorical treatment of the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia during the 1990s is largely inconsistent with Al Qaeda’s ongoing terrorist operations there following the almost complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Saudi Arabia in September 2003.⁴⁴ Although only a small number of U.S. military personnel remain in Saudi Arabia, Al Qaeda affiliates have continued a violent campaign to topple the Saudi government and have targeted non-U.S. civilians in numerous terrorist attacks.

In messages to regional audiences, Bin Laden and his deputies have characterized U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as new provocations and “crusades” that justify ongoing attacks. In his December 2004 statements, Bin Laden referred to the confrontation between the U.S., its allies, and jihadist movements as “a war of destiny between infidelity and Islam” and a “Third World War,” seemingly leaving little doubt about the scope or flexibility of Al Qaeda’s strategic ambitions, grievances, and demands. From a strategic perspective, statements from Al Zawahiri and others advocate for a phased struggle, in which the first goal is the expulsion of U.S. military forces and proximate goals include the overthrow of “corrupt” regional leaders, the creation of a sharia-ruled Islamic state, military confrontation with Israel, and conflict with Shiite Muslims.

⁴⁴ In his September 1996 declaration of jihad against the United States, Bin Laden described the presence of U.S. troops in the Arabian peninsula as “one of the worst catastrophes to befall Muslims since the death of the Prophet [Mohammed].” In an earlier interview, however, he indicated that the “the withdrawal of American troops” would serve as the “solution” to the crisis between the United States and the Islamic world.

Al Qaeda and the Jihadist International

Overall, Al Qaeda leaders have displayed a pragmatic willingness to adapt the strategic and tactical content of their statements to changing circumstances while retaining a messianic commitment to their broader ideological agenda. Although Bin Laden's self-professed goal is to "move, incite, and mobilize the [Islamic] nation"⁴⁵ until it reaches a revolutionary "ignition point,"⁴⁶ Al Qaeda leaders' statements and Al Qaeda's attacks largely have failed to effectively mobilize widespread Muslim support for their agenda thus far. Since late 2001, however, public opinion polling and media monitoring in the Middle East and broader Islamic world indicate that dissatisfaction with the United States and its foreign policy has grown significantly within many Muslim societies.

In light of this trend, Al Qaeda leaders' shift toward more explicitly political and ideological rhetoric seems to signal a direct attempt to broaden the movement's appeal, solicit greater financial and material support, and possibly inspire new and more systematically devastating attacks. Some experts have argued however, that the uncompromising, anti-democratic tone of some public statements by Bin Laden and Al Zawahiri may alienate Muslims who oppose theocracy or who support secular or representative government.

Experience suggests that Al Qaeda's leaders believe that regular attempts to characterize Al Qaeda's actions as defensive and religiously sanctioned will increase tolerance of and support for their broader ideological program. The identification of limited political objectives and the implication that their fulfilment will resolve broader grievances may generate broader appeal than the group's underlying ideological agenda. Osama Bin Laden's truce proposals addressed to citizens of the United States and its European allies illustrate this trend, but the proposals' validity has been questioned due to ongoing attacks and continuing threats.

Overall, Al Qaeda leaders' statements from the mid-1990s through the present indicate that they continue to see themselves and their followers as the vanguard of an international Islamic movement primarily committed to ending U.S. "interference" in the affairs of Islamic countries and supportive of efforts to recast Islamic societies according to narrow interpretations of Islam and Islamic law. Public statements addressed to regional and international populations will likely continue to play a prominent role in Al Qaeda's efforts to achieve its goals.

⁴⁵ "Usama Bin Ladin's Message to Iraq," *Al-Jazirah Television*, Feb. 11, 2003. Op. cit.

⁴⁶ "Bin Ladin Interviewed on Jihad Against U.S.," *Al Quds al Arabi*, Nov. 27, 1996.